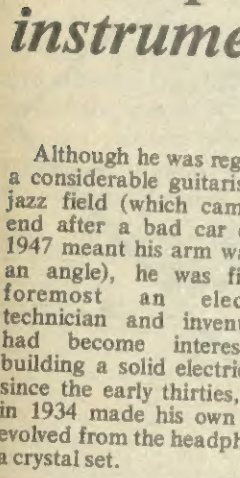
Axe Fax

Fred Rath examines the effect of the development of the instrument on players

Although he was regarded as a considerable guitarist in the jazz field (which came to an end after a bad car crash in 1947 meant his arm was set at an angle), he was first and foremost an electronics technician and inventor. He had become interested in building a solid electric guitar since the early thirties, having in 1934 made his own pickup evolved from the headphones of a crystal set.

Armed with this he went to New York, where he met Christian, becoming great friends and jamming all over town. He was still working on the solid body, filling the F holes and getting Gibsons to make one with no holes at all, even though it was still hollow. Finally in 1941, he built the "log", made out of a piece of four by four timber with a pickup to produce the sound from the strings.

The guitar body was finally made redundant as the only means of amplifying the vibration of the strings. This



The Vega — one of the first purpose-built electric guitars.

job was now being done by the pickup, set underneath the string to register magnetically the change in voltage caused by the string's vibration. Les Paul's next task was to improve the standard of the pickup, to be achieved after a long struggle to get Gibson to make the Les Paul guitar which they did in 1952.

One of the onlookers of Les Paul's work in the early days was Leo Fender. Another electronics expert, he was running a radio workshop in the thirties, mending the early amplifiers at the same time. In 1948 he produced his first solid guitar, which was to become the Telecaster.

By 1954 the Stratocaster had appeared, and these two, together with the Les Paul and the subsequent models from Gibson dominate the market to this day.

After the fifties the electric guitar remained basically unchanged, apart from some refinements to bridge, machineheads, etc., but what did change was what was expected of it.

From the late forties and early fifties the seeds of rock and roll were germinating in the form of rhythm and blues. Although a lot was piano dominated (New Orleans stars like Fats Domino, Roy Byrd), the merging with country produced a highly excitable music that caught the imagination of a bored restless generation.

Countless "stars" were projected across the media, and the guitar appeared as an accessory to fame and fortune. While Wes Montgomery, Herb Ellis and Kenny Burrell explored the intricate avenues of modern jazz, thousands of new musicians went in search of the raw nerve being hit by the new rebel heroes.

Subtlety went out the window to be replaced by volume and energy. Records like Bo Diddley's "Road Runner", using reverb and (acceptable) distortion brought respectability to what had been regarded as a fault — it was no longer necessary for the guitar to sound like a guitar. During the next decade the guitar was increasingly to be used as a machine for creating noise.

For many it was a gimmick and an easy way of covering up a lack of musical skill. In 1967 a figure emerged so far in advance of anyone else he was held in awe by stars and public alike. With his first records with the Experience, Jimi Hendrix revealed a knowledge and control of feedback, distortion and electronics that, far from being a brutish misuse of his instrument, extended its range of expression.

He was a musician of awesome ability, not only as a guitarist, an innovator of sound techniques, and a brilliant improviser, but as an artist able to convey all these in live performance through an amazing stage presence and personal charisma. The resulting sensational publicity made him retreat more into the studio, and works like "Electric Ladyland" only showed how much potential was wasted by his death.

If Hendrix represents one aspect of the guitar as a solo instrument, then the original purpose (in jazz terms) as a rhythm instrument was being updated in R and B's obvious successors, soul and funk. The original rhythm section, drums, bass (now electric bass) and guitar, were ideal as counterpoint to the improvising vocals of the soul singers, which often doubled as a lead instrument.

Small studio combos were to

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Me and my axe

The player's choice

1. Ritchie Blackmore

"THERE'S ONE thing I want to get cleared up straight away," said an enthusiastic Ritchgie Blackmore over the crackling transatlantic line, "there's this big thing about old Strat being far superior to the newer models, which of course is a load of rubbish." This controversial opener couldn's come from a more qualified source. Blackmore's name conjures up a vision of a figure dressed in black amidst a haze a swirling dry ice wielding his faithful Stratocaster, More of a symbol than an instrument, Blackmore and the Stratocaster are one.

"Some people have got a musical snobbery about older instruments," said the man from his Hollywood abode," some of the older Fenders are terrible especially the necks and the frets. A lot of people think that the new Fenders lack the quality of their predecessors, some of them are in fact better, it's all down to the individual instrument."

Blackmore is continually buying new Strats, some of which never see the end of a show, while others are guarded with great care: all get the same special treatment, by the man himself, on the fretboard giving it a more concave surface." This all started when I had an old classical which had this type of inverted surface on the neck and I found it much easier to play on. It's interesting, I've seen a lot of guitars with this type of treatment on their necks in fact John Birch is doing this to some of his custom jobs."

Although Blackmore's main axe is the Strat he does possess a Gibson 335 which he used on Deep Purple's 'Concerto For Group And Orchestra Album'.

Blackmore is currently remixing his latest band Rainbow's new album, and admits he hasn't been practising too much guitar recently in preference to his other instrument — the cello. "I've only been playing for a couple of years and it'll be ages before I get anywhere near competent. It's one of those instruments that alter with your moods. It doesn't really help my guitar playing but it's put a new dramatic dimension in to my songwriting." His interest for the cello spawns from his love for Bach (who gets a dedication on the first 'Rainbow' album) and Germany.

"I really like medieval modes, I listen to more classical music than rock and roll and I think this influences my music a lot although I try to keep rock and roll as a dominant factor." Will he ever play cello on album? "No I think I'd rather get a professional to do the job."

Amplification – wise Blackmore still uses his faithful Marshall set up and you can probably gather by his searing treble tones that the amps are 'topped up' which makes highly sensitive to radio signals, although he is gradually overcoming this problem with various screening devices.

I asked him if he's been using any effects. "No", was the adamant reply," I tried a voice bag but I didn't like the sound, it didn't really suit me, I don't really care too much for effects. I used to use one of those guitar synthesisers [the Hi Fli], they're too temperamental for me, anyway I don't want a moog."

'There's this big thing about the old Strats being far superior to the new models'

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